EMMAUS
Luke 24:13-31
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This is my favorite Sunday. Now that may seem a peculiar choice at first. In fact, the mythology about us religious professionals is that this is our least favorite day. What, after all, do you do for an encore to three full services on Easter morning, truckloads of lilies, baptisms, brass choirs, absolutely gorgeous music, and everybody here together? Even the culture senses that Easter is the ecclesiastical equivalent of Academy Awards night. Religion made the front page and the evening news last Sunday. There was no marathon down Broad Street, no grand prix road race up and down the streets and avenues of the city to interfer with the religious public's agenda.

In the trade this is known as "low Sunday" and the professionals often use that as an excuse to take the day off, to rest our weary bodies and cool down our own over-heated spirits. It remains my favorite day, however. Please do not misunderstand. I love Easter. I love the joy and hope and every custom with which we struggle to express it. I dissent from that body of prevailing opinion which berates the souls who come to church only on Easter. If you don't worship regularly, by all means, Easter is the day to do it. And I positively find offensive the well-meaning ribbing that calls attention to the once a year attender and adds self consciousness and guilt to a spirit that has decided to expose itself to a little delight, a bit of serendipitous joy.

I love Easter, but this is my favorite, and I am delighted with our decision to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on this day, because if there is ever an occasion to observe the presence of the Holy in our midst it is in the season of the resurrection. I would argue that this Sunday is the most significant observance in the Christian year, theologically.

The accumulated effect of all the celebrating we did last Sunday morning is to leave the impression that Easter is about an event that happened two thousand years ago, period: akin to the Trojan Wars, the assasination of Julius Caesar, the campaigns of Alexander the Great, Easter is about history. That is theological heresy, of course. But by focusing on the event of resurrection alone, by pondering the historicity of the accounts and puzzling over the biological improbabilities we miss, altogether, the Good News of Easter, and the theological genius of Christianity.

The Easter Gospel is the stunning announcement that the love of God lives among us: that the risen Christ is the power and love and justice of God alive, active, at work in the life of the world. That's what all the shouting was about last week. It is so important, even as we are searching for some proof, some verifiable evidence, to recall that the only thing remotely resembling evidence didn't convince anybody at the time. The only data the New Testament presents on Easter is an empty tomb. And that didn't convince anybody of anything. The people who stumbled on to it were scared to death. What made them Christians: what transformed frightened fishermen into courageous heralds of a new kingdom; what brought Simon Peter from the courtyard where he denied knowing Jesus to martyrdom, voluntering to be crucified upside down out of love of Christ, was not a ten second look into an empty hole in the side of a hill, but the experience of the power of the risen Christ in the world.

tomb + story don't prove

see Call Sassy Luke

That, it seems to me, is what those of us who come to church on the Sunday after Easter are left with. And that is why it is my favorite Sunday. The text for the day is that wonderfully human story of Emmaus, in the Gospel of Luke.

Two of the friends of Jesus on the first day of the week after the crucifixion headed out for Emmaus, a town several miles from Jerusalem. They had been hiding since the terrible events of Friday. Now the holiday weekend was over; the new week was beginning; life was resuming. Jesus was dead. It was that simple. Several of their number had reported that the tomb was empty. Too bad. And so two headed out of town, for a walk perhaps. As they walked they were joined by a third man with whom they talked about the events of the past few days. They did not know him, but they persuaded him to eat the evening meal with them at Emmaus. There, at table, breaking bread together, in an act reminiscent of a supper they had shared several nights before, they recognized him.

Please notice the peculiar fact that two people who knew him before failed to recognize him now. And notice that part of the reason they didn't recognize him was that they weren't expecting to encounter him there. In fact, at least part of the reason they were in Emmaus was to get away from the memory, the place, from him, even.

On this day the word is that the power of Christianity is not in the celebration of an event that happened two thousand years ago, regardless of how glorious it was last Sunday. The essence of it is not history, but experience; not then, but now. The ultimate homiletical criteria for any sermon, any religious gesture, any belief is the blunt question "so what?" Does it matter? Does it make any difference? Does it have anything to do with the life of the world, with the ambiguity and injustice and suffering of the world we encounter in the paper? Does it have to do with our humanness: our striving and hoping and working and loving. Does it have to do with beauty, and our deepest affections and grandest passions and profoundest joys?

On this day the word is yes, God's love lives among us. Death itself does not defeat it. The world is full of God's love and hopeful potential, and heart filling beauty, and blood stirring passion.

To a class of graduating seminary seniors about to become ministers, Frederick Buechner said:

> "Again and again Christ is present not where, as priests, you would be apt to look for him but precisely where you would not have thought to look for him in a thousand years. The great preacher, the sunset, the Mozart Requiem can leave you cold, but the child in the doorway, the rain on the roof, the half-remembered dream, can speak of him and for him with an eloquence that turns your knees to water." (A Room Called Remember, p. 149)

This is my favorite Sunday because it gathers up the beauty and humanity and power of the whole Biblical witness. It affirms that there is holiness in ordinariness: that the common, simple life you and I are given to live is in fact sacred. It affirms that the power of resurrection is on the side of life - our common life: our relationships.

It reminds me that the love of God is out there on the dusty roads, the streets, and dirty alleys of the city: that God's risen Christ is in the person of every individual who comes through the doors of this church because he's heard a rumor that love is alive and well.

It reminds me that you and I may expect to encounter the healing, life giving love of God in the very place the risen Christ came to the two - at table: that he is present when love is affirmed and shared; that God's love for us lives in the people with whom we are privileged to break bread; our children, our spouses, our dearest friends.

That's what this Sunday is about. It is easily missed actually. The two who walked to Emmaus with him almost didn't realize it. It was at table - to which he bids us and to which we come.

"When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him." (Luke 24:30) Amen.

where we are hungry -
real - profound -